

Landowner Protection Initiatives

Since the majority of Watauga County is in private ownership, protection of significant sites will depend largely on the active participation of landowners and interested citizens. Although many areas have clearly benefitted from conscious decisions by landowners to retain the natural values of their land, many may not be aware of conservation options which provide financial incentives as well as assistance in conservation management. In certain cases, assistance could make the difference between divesting land for development and retaining it for natural values. Options for those who desire to manage forests include several cost-sharing options offered by agencies such as the N.C. Division of Forest Resources and county offices of the Natural Resources Conservation Service. Landowners with farmland areas to be retired who wish to reforest or establish wildlife habitat can receive cost-sharing assistance from the Farm Service Agency. Assistance to those interested in reducing runoff of sediment, nutrients, and pesticides into surface waters can receive cost-sharing assistance through local offices of the Soil and Water Conservation District. Many of these programs also provide tax incentives to landowners.

An option for owners who wish to preserve high quality land in a natural state is the North Carolina Registry of Natural Areas Program administered by the North Carolina Natural Heritage Program of the state Division of Parks and Recreation. The program relies on voluntary agreements and provides management prescriptions, some degree of statutory protection from pipelines and transmission lines, and public recognition (if desired).

The conservation easement is a flexible, but permanent, option for conserving land with natural, scenic, or cultural values. Conservation easements can be sold or donated, they confer state and federal tax benefits to the owner, and they are "in perpetuity" -- being affixed to the property deed. They allow the owner to retain ownership as well as property rights that are established in the agreement. Certain rights, such as the right to develop in some areas, are deeded over to a recognized conservation organization. Several organizations qualified to establish conservation easements work in the area. The organizations and their current locations are: the North Carolina Chapter of The Nature Conservancy, located in Durham; the Conservation Trust for North Carolina in Raleigh; the High Country Conservancy in Boone; the National Committee for the New River in West Jefferson; and the Blue Ridge Rural Land Trust in Sugar Grove. Updated information on how to contact land trusts can be obtained through the North Carolina Natural Heritage Program, N.C. Division of Parks and Recreation in Raleigh or from the Conservation Trust for North Carolina.